

**FEATURING BEST PRACTICES
OF STATE AGENCIES AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE
COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**

**Manage Resources and Capabilities
Self Help Virginia**

**Department of Housing and Community Development
implemented this best practice
in May 1998**

*Qualifying under the
Best Practices catalogue*

2 ????

232 Construct facilities

**Best Practice Summary
(how it works, how you measure it)**

Many communities throughout the Commonwealth lack public water and wastewater systems. Water shortages during the summer months are not uncommon and residents are forced to pay to haul water into their communities. Unsafe living conditions also occur due to failing septic systems and contaminated private, shallow wells. Local, state, and federal resources to help provide public facilities are limited and some communities will never be able to acquire matching funds to access these programs.

Self Help Virginia is modeled after a program developed by the Rensselaerville Institute in New York. The program uses a community problem-solving, dollar-saving approach to enable small communities to meet the challenge of creating viable and affordable water and wastewater systems. The program taps neighborhood talent, manpower and creativity to provide water and sewer services in areas where those services are difficult to provide through conventional means. The program stretches limited financial resources to assist more communities than would otherwise be possible.

A critical component of the program is that projects must use more volunteers than paid staff and must achieve a *minimum* cost savings of 40 percent over conventional contracted projects. Neighborhood residents act as their own project managers, lay water and sewer lines, and operate leased or donated excavation equipment to achieve cost savings.

Financial assistance is provided through the Virginia Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG). ***Self Help Virginia*** projects are limited to no more than \$350,000 in CDBG assistance with a limit of no more than \$10,000 per household served. At least 51 percent of the proposed beneficiaries must meet low- and moderate-income guidelines to participate. Applications to participate are taken on a first-come, first-served basis.

Not every community has what it takes to participate. Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) staff conducts a careful analysis of each community to assess their *readiness* and *capacity*. Readiness reflects the degree of total community commitment to the project, whether or not they perceive the lack of water or sewer to be their number one priority. Community capacity reflects whether or not residents have the technical ability to pull the project off. Do they have people who can run equipment, donate materials and labor, or handle other duties on a volunteer basis? In addition, a critical need is the presence of one or more "sparkplugs" in the community. These are people who have the skills to become project coordinators and will make sure the community completes the project on time and on budget.

If a community is deemed to have both the capacity and readiness to proceed, a work plan is developed, a budget finalized, and a grant commitment made.

Impact on the Process Organizational Performance (OUTCOMES)

Three projects have been completed to date providing water service to a total of 131 new customers. The total cost of these projects, if they had been bid and constructed conventionally, would have been an estimated \$1,670,700. All three were completed with a total investment of \$458,000 in CDBG funds with a total cost savings of \$1,149,700 compared to conventional contracting prices. The 69 percent cost savings exceeded the program target of 40 percent.

One project involved the installation of over seven miles of water line. Contractors estimated that the project would take six-to-eight months to complete. This project was completed in three months time, saved 75 percent over the conventional cost, and set a new national record for the amount of water line installed in a single day for a ***Self Help*** project.

Six additional projects are underway or nearing completion with projected cost savings of over 50 percent. When completed, these projects will provide water or sewer service to 686 people.

Clearly, the ***Self Help*** approach is enabling DHCD to stretch its limited grant funds to provide critical water and sewer services to more communities and residents than would otherwise be possible.

Best Practice Qualification

Benchmarking with other states indicates that the amount of costs savings exceeds their efforts. As mentioned before, one project set a new national record for amount of water line installed by volunteers in a single day. It should also be mentioned that this water line, when tested, demonstrated zero leaks, exceeding the specifications a private contractor would have been expected to meet.

Harnessing the skills and abilities of community residents to "buy down" the retail cost of projects is not limited to water and sewer services. Many agencies of the Commonwealth could adapt these principles to leverage and stretch limited state financial resources.

For Additional Information

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